

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 CCO-00 NSCE-00 USIE-00 INRE-00

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FM AMEMBASSY LONDON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8375

INFO AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN

AMEMBASSY DUBLIN

AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE

AMEMBASSY LUXEMBOURG

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY ROME

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, UK

SUBJECT: THE SEARCH FOR A NEW GOVERNMENT

REF: LONDON 2686

1. SUMMARY: THE LIBERALS ARE WEIGHING PRIME MINISTER HEATH'S OFFER TO JOIN HIM IN TRYING TO FORM A NEW GOVERNMENT. THERE IS STRONG RELUCTANCE AMONG LIBERALS TO ENTER A FORMAL COALITION, AS HEATH DESIRES, BUT THEY MAY AGREE TO SUPPORT A CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT IN RETURN FOR A FIRM PROMISE OF EARLY ELECTORAL REFORM. WHETHER THIS WOULD BE SUFFICIENT TO ENABLE HEATH TO CARRY ON IS DOUBTFUL. END SUMMARY

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2. THE FOURTEEN NEWLY-ELECTED LIBERAL MPS ARE MEETING

THIS MORNING (MARCH 4) TO CONSIDER PRIME MINISTER HEATH'S OFFER OF A COALITION TO FORM A NEW GOVERNMENT. HEATH MET WITH LIBERAL LEADER JEREMY THORPE ON SATURDAY AFTERNOON (MARCH 2); BOTH MEN THEN CONSULTED WITH LEADING COLLEAGUES IN THEIR RESPECTIVE PARTIES; AND THE TWO MET AGAIN LATE LAST EVENING (MARCH 3).

3. SOURCES CLOSE TO THORPE TELL US THAT AT THEIR FIRST MEETING, HEATH OFFERED THORPE A SPEAKER'S CONFERENCE TO CONSIDER AND BRING FORWARD WITHIN TEN TO TWELVE WEEKS PROPOSALS FOR THE INTRODUCTION OF SOME FORM OF PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION. HE ALSO OFFERED THE LIBERALS TWO CABINET POSTS (PRESUMABLY FOREIGN OFFICE TO THORPE, AND SCOTTISH OFFICE TO JO GRIMOND, FORMER LEADER OF THE LIBERALS AND THE ONLY LIBERAL CANDIDATE NOT TO BE OPPOSED BY THE SCOTTISH NATIONALISTS AT THE GENERAL ELECTION.)

4. HEATH REPORTEDLY TOLD THORPE THAT HE WAS ALSO PREPARED TO MOVE QUICKLY TO DEVOLVE POWER FROM WEST-MINISTER TO ASSEMBLIES IN SCOTLAND AND WALES. THIS WOULD MEET A MAJOR DEMAND OF THE LIBERALS AND HELP TO WIN TACIT SUPPORT FROM THE NINE NATIONALISTS, WHO ON ECONOMIC ISSUES WOULD BE MORE LIKELY TO VOTE WITH LABOR. HEATH TOLD THORPE THAT HE WAS CONFIDENT THAT SEVEN OF THE ELEVEN ULSTER UNIONISTS WOULD SUPPORT A CONSERVATIVE-LIBERAL GOVERNMENT. SUCH A COALITION WOULD COMMAND A PAPER MAJORITY OF 317 TO 304 OVER LABOR, IF THE NATIONALISTS AND OTHER UNIONISTS ABSTAINED.

5. OUR SOURCES IN THE LIBERAL PARTY SAY THAT INITIAL SENTIMENT AMONG MOST OF THE 14 MPS AND THE PARTY'S RANK-AND-FILE IS OVERWHELMINGLY AGAINST ENTERING A COALITION. IT IS AT LEAST CONCEIVABLE, HOWEVER, THAT IF HEATH'S OFFER ON ELECTORAL REFORM IS FIRM ENOUGH, THE LIBERALS MIGHT BE PREPARED TO SUPPORT A CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT IN THE COMMONS. THEY HAVE SAID REPEATEDLY THAT THEY WOULD SUPPORT EITHER MAJOR PARTY IF IT PURSUED "MODERATE" POLICIES. WHETHER THIS WOULD BE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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ENOUGH TO ENABLE HEATH TO CARRY ON IS PROBLEMATICAL.

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